

SHIELDS, JAMES (GEN.)

DRAWER 98

GENERALS (UNION)

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# Civil War Officers Union

James Shields

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

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## THE LATE GEN. SHIELDS.

Gen. Shields once had a difficulty with Abraham Lincoln, which resulted in preparations for a duel. Shortly after his return from the Mexican War, a newspaper in Illinois, where he lived, published an article that displeased him very much. He called upon the editor, and said it was offensive, and insisted upon knowing the name of the author. The editor asked time to consider, and meanwhile consulted Mr. Lincoln, informing him that the writer of the article was a young woman. "Oh, I'll settle that," said Lincoln. "Tell Shields I am personally responsible for it."

This was enough for Shields, and he immediately challenged Lincoln to mortal combat. Broadwords were chosen as the weapons most likely to place them on an equal footing. The proceedings were conducted with great secrecy, and, in order to have the amusement to themselves a brushwood copse was chosen for the encounter. But friends had followed unobserved, and came up in time to catch the belligerents in the act of clearing a space for the fight by hewing down the brushwood with their words. The ludicrousness of the thing was soon made apparent, and the affair ended in good humor.

There was a great deal that was good in Shields. He was downright. He sympathized with Irish liberty, though he came to this country when nine years of age. He was not drawn into any of the military movements against England, because he looked upon them with the vision of a practical soldier. He wanted to see clearly more possibility of success than was ever made apparent to him. He was approached unsuccessfully for the purpose of getting his aid in several movements, the result of which proved the excellence of his judgment. Yet, his military education, aside from that he got in the wars, was self-education. He never attended any military school.

He was fond of telling how he got the nine bullets that he carried in his body from the battles of Cerro Gordo and Chapultepec. The doctors, in order to clean the wounds, passed a handkerchief clear through his body.

He used to tell a story of a forlorn hope that he led during the Mexican war in order to relieve some English ladies, who were suffering privation and indignities in the City of Mexico. With a small company of kindred spirits, he penetrated to the heart of the city and released the sufferers, who were quartered in the American camp until the city was taken, and they were restored to their homes. Gen. Scott reprimanded him for this, but in such a slight way that it did not prevent his promotion.

Early in the late war Gen. Shields' friends sought to raise an Irish brigade for him. Chief Justice Daly and others were foremost in bringing him out and organizing the brigade. He arrived late from California, with the understanding that he was to be given the command. Meanwhile Thomas Francis Meagher had been acting as general, and, although he gave Gen. Shields a grand dinner and reception, showed no disposition to give

up the command. Shields was much disappointed, and by no means appeased with the command of a brigade under Banks, that was given him. He gained, however, the credit of winning about the only battle credited to Banks—the battle of Winchester. He had a pet project of capturing Stonewall Jackson, but complained bitterly that, just as his plans were about maturing, he was ordered, by Gen. McDowell, to retreat.

Gen. Shields was five feet eight inches in height, of compact build, and in his youth had dark hair. His eyes were dark and piercing, and gave him a wild look to strangers. He was very attentive to women, and fond of paying them compliments. He made long visits to friends in New York and throughout the country. He was once dining at the house of a prominent citizen of New York, whose wife, a member of a staid old Dutch family, did not relish Gen. Shields' reticence about his domestic relations. She took occasion to speak out bluntly on one occasion, proposing "the health of Gen. Shields and his wife." Some of his military associates present were quite surprised to learn that he was married, but the good matron carried her point, and in this semi-public way took the opportunity to warn some of her maiden lady friends not to lose their hearts. Gen. Shields leaves a wife and family at Carrollton, Mo. One son is 19.

He was a man of great physical endurance, and yet did not seem to take care of himself. He would eat and drink almost anything, and work as long as there was work to do. As a conversationalist he was a marvel. He seemed to remember everything he ever read. He was fond of Burns, and was born sufficiently far north in Ireland to have some of the air of Scotland wafted over to him. He had no petty national feeling that would prevent his admiring a poet of another nationality.





GENERAL JAMES SHIELDS.

From a photograph kindly loaned by C. B. Hall, New York. General Shields was born at Dungannon, County of Tyrone, Ireland, in 1810; came to the United States in 1826; located in Randolph County, Illinois, and taught school there; was admitted to the bar in 1832, and practised at Kaskaskia. He was elected to the legislature in 1836, and there became acquainted with Lincoln. In 1841 he was made auditor of public accounts of Illinois, and it was while holding this office that he challenged Lincoln to mortal combat. In 1843 Governor Ford appointed him an associate justice of the Supreme Court—an office which he resigned two years later to become commissioner of the general land-office. His gallantry in the Mexican War was such that he was brevetted a major-general. The prestige which his military record gave him made him a United States Senator in 1849. Defeated for reelection by Lyman Trumbull in 1855, he removed to Minnesota. There, May 12, 1858, he was elected to the United States Senate to fill a vacancy, serving about ten months. Then he went to California for a year. August 19, 1861, President Lincoln, his old-time enemy, presented him with a brigadier-general's commission; but two years later he gave this up, and settled on a farm in Missouri. He remained in retirement for a while, but eventually emerged to become a member of the legislature, a defeated candidate for Congress, adjutant-general of the State, and finally, in 1879, once more a United States Senator, serving about six weeks of an unexpired term. He thus had the rare distinction to be a United States Senator from three States. In his later years he delivered lectures—"Reminiscences of the Mexican War" and "Recollections of Eminent Statesmen and Soldiers." He died suddenly at Ottumwa, Iowa, June 1, 1879. General Shields has been variously rated by his contemporaries. That he was a man of considerable ability is conceded, and he possessed the warmth and generosity common to his race.—*J. McCann Davis.*

